

Set in Motion The New York State Council on the Arts Celebrates 30 Years of Independents. NY. 1994.  
Introduction

Debby Silverfine and Linda Earle

“Set in Motion” is comprised of films and videotapes funded between 1961 and 1993 as part of the New York State Council on the Arts' dual commitment to fostering the work of creative artists and promoting the development of artistic forms and disciplines. “Set in Motion” grew out of a series of planning meetings held by NYSCA's staff and Council members. In light of recent debates in the media and in legislative corridors about the value of art in American culture, and the role of public money in supporting the preservation of our cultural heritage, the time seemed right to review NYSCA's mission and accomplishments. This retrospective reflects a generation of public support for the creative work of New York State's film and videomakers. Its astonishing variety of visions has given us an opportunity to reflect on NYSCA's role in broadening access to the tools of image-making, surely one of the most important hallmarks of cultural change in our society over the past 30 years. In reviewing the many films and tapes produced with NYSCA support, we became reacquainted with titles that helped launch careers or garnered international critical acclaim, and many other works that pioneered forms and techniques later used by studios and broadcast media.

Private philanthropy had long helped support the state's major cultural institutions and had indirectly supported arts enrichment programs at various settlement houses and community centers. But it took the establishment of the State Arts Council to begin to develop services and programs statewide. “Early in 1960, the New York State Legislature, through a bill introduced by Senator MacNeil Mitchell and with strong personal backing from Governor Nelson Rockefeller, established a precedent among governments by passing an act which was broadly designed ‘to make recommendations concerning appropriate methods to encourage participation in and appreciation of the Arts.’” (1)

From its earliest years, the Council recognized the growing interest in film exhibition, production and training and considered the potential of supporting this work. Quality foreign films and emerging talents of the “American New Wave” were attracting interest through a limited number of cinemas and film societies. The New Yorker and Bleecker Street Cinemas, Cinema 16, the Film Makers' Cinematheque and the Museum of Modern Art's Film Department in New York City, and the International Museum of Photography/George Eastman House in Rochester were devoted to revivals and the “artfilm”. At the same time, public libraries in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Rochester were collecting and circulating classic and independent films to new audiences. The Council later supported many of these and other exhibition venues, and developed a program of support to libraries that allowed wider geographic distribution of films to rural and urban areas.

Other new entities were also changing the face of the media landscape. Public television was expanding its universe of interests beyond instructional programming. New types of TV documentary and talk show formats emerged, including *Black Journal* and *Tell It Like It Is*. The Ford Foundation began to fund independent filmmakers in 1964, and, in 1965, the Rockefeller Foundation began funding artists for experimentation with video. Also during this time, CBS Produced Alwin Nikolais' first video image-processing experiments.

In 1961, the Council had commissioned Robert Bell to make *Watching Ballet*, a 16mm film with Jacques D'Amboise and Allegra Kent demonstrating ballet technique. The film, completed in 1963, was used in the Ballet Society's touring educational programs. In August 1965, NYSCA Executive Director John Hightower convened an advisory group to discuss ways the Council could help disseminate distribution information and tour films to communities throughout the state. (2) The group included Ralph Hetzel, the acting head of the Academy Of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences; Margareta Akermarck, from the Museum of Modern Art's Film Library; Amos Vogel, founder of Cinema 16 and Program Director of the newly-founded New York Film Festival; and producers Arthur Meyer and Dore Shary, who soon after became the first Commissioner of New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs.

Within the year, NYSCA had created the Film Project, and, under the direction of Peter Bradley, began sponsoring tours of contemporary art that included filmmakers and artists exploring

multi-media and newly emerging small format video. In 1967, the Film Project's work was formalized within the agency as the Film Program. A variety of film-related activities followed, including screenings in secondary schools, colleges and film societies, at which critics and experts would speak; as well as support for independent film and video production. (3) From the beginning, diversity was a key aspect of the Council's support for media. NYSCA embraced experimental forms as well as traditional ones, professional as well as training opportunities. There was a strongly held belief that communities in rural areas and inner-city neighborhoods, and students of all ages deserved access to the arts, both as practitioners and as audiences. NYSCA-funded community youth workshops offered production training alongside classes in dance, drama, music and painting. Hands-on workshops for youth, it was felt, helped to develop more adventurous audiences. In addition, professional workshops began to attract artists from other disciplines and provided supportive environments for those with limited access to production opportunities within the industry.,

The Council added support for electronic media in 1970, when small-format video presented new possibilities for artistic experimentation and grassroots journalism. As with the development of its Film Program, funding for media acknowledged the importance of connecting artists and audiences early on. NYSCA helped seed programs in video training, production and exhibition throughout the state. Public TV stations were funded to work with independent producers and provide an outlet for their work. And in 1972, the Rockefeller Foundation and NYSCA helped established the TV Lab at WNET/13, which gave artists access to broadcast-quality equipment. University-based programs such as SUNY Buffalo's Center for Media Study, Syracuse University's Synapse Studio, and the Experimental Television Center - first a project within SUNY Binghamton, later incorporated - provided access to resources, equipment and faculty for many emerging artists. The Council also encouraged a number of New York City-based video production groups to work in other areas of the state in order to share their know-how and enthusiasm with arts and community groups interested in creating local television. A number of production collectives found receptive communities, and relocated to Jamestown, Woodstock and Lanesville to create early community cable and low-power television projects.

Training and access programs, and increased exhibition and distribution venues stimulated production of scores of tapes and films during this period. While there had been occasional production funding and commissions since the beginning, and film projects were funded with increasing frequency during the early 1970s, it wasn't until the Council developed a more comprehensive relationship to the field that it began to directly support production. Though not a formal category of support, a dozen filmmakers and 20 media artists received production funding in 1974. Film production funding increased dramatically the following year when NYSCA launched the Bicentennial Film Project with matching monies from the National Endowment for the Art. In 1976, both the Media and Film Programs developed guidelines to meet the growing number of applicants and to provide instruction to artists new to the grants application process. In 1984, the Council created the Individual Artists Program to oversee direct support for film and video production.

The Council has always attempted to respond energetically to the full spectrum of artist-initiated activity in film and electronic media including narrative, documentary and experimental forms. The scope of work supported has included films and videotapes demonstrating both promise as well as accomplishment. These projects represent the artist's vision and point of view. They are produced outside the studio system with funds from savings, families, friends, NYSCA and other funders. The artists (in most cases the director) who conceive these projects maintain artistic control over all aspects of production. Styles, genres and budgets vary considerably.

By design, there is no typical NYSCA project, no prescribed funding agenda in terms of content or form. This is insured by the centrality of the Council's peer panel grant review system. Over the years, panels have been comprised of literally hundreds of artists, programmers, teachers and curators from every corner of the state. Their job is to advise the Council by reviewing written applications and artists' work samples and to recommend support. Because of the volume of activity in New York State, funding has always been highly competitive. Artistic and demographic diversity on the panels means that in a typical year, 1990, for example, NYSCA funded 48 projects including preproduction support for a first

feature by Todd Haynes; an installation work by video artist Mary Lucier; technical research for an interactive narrative based on African storytelling by Collis Davis; animation by Maureen Selwood; and documentaries on such diverse subjects as Atlantic City (by Michael Penland), psychologist Evelyn Hooker (by Richard Schmeichen) and civil rights activist Dollie Robinson (by Melvin McCray). Budgets for these works ranged from \$7,000 to \$200,000.

The work in “Set in Motion” was selected by Debby Silverfine, Director of the Electronic Media and Film Program; Linda Earle, Director of the Individual Artists Program and Leanne Mella, a consulting independent curator. Organized to showcase a wide range of aesthetics, artists and genres, this project by no means exhausts the territory and the multiple histories of independent film and video. Of the hundreds of titles considered, many outstanding works have not been included. We hope that “Set in Motion” will spark renewed interest in earlier works, introduce titles to new audiences and help artists to discover a broader public for their next efforts.

One area of activity not included in this exhibition is audio/radio art. The Council has supported an impressive range of productions, artists' residencies at public radio stations around the state, and has sponsored seminars and workshops designed to increase exposure to innovative work. We hope that NYSCA-supported audio work will be the subject of a series at a later date.

Finally, the essays and statements in this catalogue are by the “eye-witnesses” to the development of independent media. They speak to the role that public funding has played in helping to create a space for media art in a commercial universe and in promoting a diversity of vision and expression.

“The formative years of the Council’s programs in film and video were grounded in, and sustained by, a conviction that film and video had as much potential to stir, startle, transport, entertain, and inform as the more traditional arts, and often more. In concert with superb teams of panelists, we allocated support on the principle that advancing the work of artists in film and video would advance both the media themselves, and the appreciation of audiences. The Council had been created by a powerful arts enthusiast Governor Nelson Rockefeller, and there was a sense of optimism and a belief that support should include the exploration of cultural terrain. Creating the programs themselves was a dynamic, evolving process involving passionate discussion in panel meetings and lively interaction with the community of media artists. We tried, in undertaking this serious business, not to take ourselves too seriously, and we had fun. The programs did nurture and support the creation of vital, visionary and historically important work. Audience interest and discrimination were broadened and deepened. And to it continues.”

Peter Bradley, Director of Film TV/Media and Literature Program 1966-1977

“After organizing the first museum exhibition of video art *Vision and Television* at Brandeis University in 1970, I was invited to join the NYSCA staff as the TV/Media staff officer under Peter Bradley. Barbara Haspiel was my counterpart in Film, and a wonderful colleague. The Council’s budget had just increased from \$2 million to \$20 million in state support. Peter deserves great credit for creating a climate that was open and favorable to bold experimentation and input from artists on peer panels. The three years I spent there were a time of idealism, futurespeak, political upheaval and intense competition.”

Russell Connor, Painter. Director, Media Program, 1970-1973

“During the time I served as head of the Media Program, we doubled the allotment to independent works in video, while expanding the funds to distribution and exhibition programs. Also, we began to support critical writing on video.”

John Giancola. Associate Professor, Communications Department at University of Tampa.  
Director, Media Program, 1981-1984

“I was a young professional just starting on a career path when I came to NYSCA, and it proved to be an extraordinary and rigorous training ground. The aspirations of NYSCA reflected the fierce visions, startling creativity and the vigorous spirit of its applicants. The Film Program was jam-packed with

applicants whose energy, vigor, imagination and dedication established New York as the nation's premier community for independent production, training and advocacy. I felt very privileged and challenged to work with such a talented and occasionally irascible group of individuals."

Nancy Sher, Arts Consultant. Director, Film Program, 1978-1980

"NYSCA dollars encouraged artists to create works that might have, to use a phrase that I think more grantmaking agencies should honor, 'more soul than success'. Nam June Paik, the Korean-born video artist once wrote, 'A thorough study of video must start with the horse, for the horse was the fastest communications medium up to the invention of the telephone in 1863.' I am proud of NYSCA for supporting those numerous artists who make the 'leap', connecting the horse and video."

Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, Independent Producer. Director, Media Program, 1985-1988.

"For more than 30 years, NYSCA has refined a system of intelligent decision-making that yields strikingly successful results, flying in the face of well-known natural laws of bureaucracy. Just look at the work in this collection of independent film and video. Brilliant in all its diversity, the program remains but the fin of the shark. Bravo to the artists, the media arts organizations, the panelists, and the NYSCA staff members over the decades, who have kept sharp on the cutting edge of our culture."

Arthur Tsuchiya, Assistant Director, Media Arts Program, National Endowment for the Arts. NYSCA Media Program, 1981-1988.

## Notes

1 Seymour H. Knox, Chairman's Statement, (New York State Council on the Arts Annual Report), 1960/64, P. 7. The New York State Council on the Arts is a government agency. Its budget is appropriated by the State Legislature and approved by the Governor annually.

2 Internal memo, "Initial Meeting on Council Film Project, August 13, 1965." Session convened by John Hightower, Executive Director, and Omar Lerman, Consultant, Performing Arts Program.

3 Participating groups in the screening series received initial membership in the American Federation of Film Societies. The project was supported by NYSCA, the National Council on the Arts (the earlier name of the NEA and now its governing body), the State Education Department and the Motion Picture Association of America.

4 Production and workshop opportunities have been funded through the Adaptors (Brooklyn) Apparatus Productions (NYC), Asian CineVision (NYC), Black Filmmaker Foundation (NYC), Camera News (NYC), Collective for LivingCinema(NYC), Downtown Community Television (NYC), Electronic Arts Intermix (NYC), Experimental Intermedia Foundation (NYC). Experimental Television Center (Owego), Film and Video Workshop (Westchester), Global Village (NYC), Hallwalls (Buffalo), Intermedia Arts Center (Bayville), Ithaca Video Project, the Kitchen (NYC), Latino Collaborative (NYC), Media Bus (Lanesville), Media Study (Buffalo), Millennium Film Workshop (NYC), Portable Channel (Rochester), Staten Island Community Television, Squeaky Wheel (Buffalo), Synapse Studio (Syracuse), Visual Studies Workshop (Rochester), White Ox (Rochester), Women's Interart Center (NYC), Women/Artist/Filmmaker (NYC), Women Make Movies (NYC), and Young Filmmakers (NYC), now known as Film/VideoArts.